

A guide to using the  
**OPPORTUNITY INDEX**  
to support your community

## About the Opportunity Index

Every community should provide its residents with the opportunity to develop their potential. In our country today, opportunity and well-being are not distributed equitably. Disparities are associated with many factors, including one's place of residence, sexual orientation, skin color, and many more. Explicit discrimination, particularly on the basis of race, has contributed to the inequitable distribution of opportunity in countless communities.

The Opportunity Index ([opportunityindex.org](http://opportunityindex.org)) compiles and analyzes timely and critical national, state, and county-level data so that communities can build opportunity. Individuals, families, communities, and governments all influence access to opportunity and well-being, and improvement efforts can occur simultaneously at all levels, making measuring opportunity a difficult task. To track successes and challenges and illuminate context, communities need tools like the Opportunity Index that provide credible and compelling data. Identifying key leverage points and inequities can put communities on a path to open doors for more people and improve outcomes.

The Index provides detailed insights for how opportunity is distributed and accessed across the country, with data for 20 indicators across the dimensions of economy, education, health, and community—collected at national, state, and county levels and disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender subgroups. These indicators are aggregated to provide composite scores on each dimension and on overall opportunity: Opportunity Scores (at the state and national levels) and Opportunity Grades (at the county level). The interactive online tool visualizes how communities are doing in terms of their overall Opportunity Score/Grade, their Dimension Score, or their performance on specific indicators.

## About this Guide

This guide illustrates how individuals can use the Opportunity Index to better understand how opportunity in their community is determined and distributed, and how to put this knowledge to use. The Index can help donors, community members, policymakers, and researchers make data-driven decisions about where and how to widen opportunity and reduce disparities in their communities.

This guide includes the following components:

1. Four fictional scenarios focused on how to utilize the data for program improvement, policymaking, and community advocacy
2. Details about the available data and how to access it
3. An appendix that provides an overview of the 2018-2019 indicators

## Case Studies

The fictional case studies below provide examples of how people might use the data to develop a fuller understanding of how opportunity in their community is determined and distributed, and how to put this knowledge to use.

## Scenario 1: Using data to target home visiting services and increase engagement

A home visiting program has a goal to increase residents' use of its services. The program serves Cowlitz and Clark counties in Washington state and focuses on low-income women pregnant with their first child. Program staff particularly want to increase their engagement with teen mothers. Program data reveal that utilization in Cowlitz County is lower than in Clark County. By examining Opportunity Index data in the key areas of difference shown in the table below, staff can better understand the context in each county that might influence residents' use of services.

Because of higher rates of youth disconnection (a term used for youth who are not engaged in school or work) in Cowlitz County, program staff may choose to conduct outreach in nontraditional places (that is, beyond schools) to better reach teen mothers. Also, the program currently calculates its staffing capacity based on the overall county population; however, it serves only low-income families. Consequently, because Clark County has a smaller proportion of low-income families, it has a higher staff-to-consumer ratio, a factor associated with higher community engagement.

Program staff might also use these data to tailor services and identify other resources or organizations they might approach. For example, compared to Clark County, Cowlitz County has higher rates of violent crime and deaths related to alcohol, drug abuse, or suicide. These and other data might lead the home-visiting program to expand its trauma-informed services, and its substance use services in Cowlitz County.

Cowlitz and Clark Counties: 2018		
	Cowlitz	Clark
<b>Grade</b>	C	B-
<b>Opportunity Score</b>	47.6	55.0
<b>Economy Score</b>	49.6	61.4
<b>Education Score</b>	44.6	51.0
<b>Community Score</b>	37.6	42.2
<b>Health Score</b>	58.7	65.2

<b>Economy</b>	Cowlitz	Clark
Poverty rate (% of population below poverty line)	16.9%	10.2%

<b>Education</b>	Cowlitz	Clark
Preschool (% ages 3 and 4 in school)	41.9%	37.8%
On-Time High School Graduation (% of freshmen who graduate in four years)	80.8%	83.7%

<b>Community</b>	Cowlitz	Clark
Youth Not in School and Not Working (% ages 16-24)	19.2%	13.9%
Violent Crime (per 100,000 population)	259.4	220.2

<b>Health</b>	Cowlitz	Clark
Health Insurance Coverage (% of population under age 65 without health insurance)	9.1%	9.3%
Deaths Related to Alcohol / Drug Abuse or Suicide (per 100,000 population)	38.0	28.1

<b>Population</b>	Cowlitz	Clark
	104,756	465,548

### How to Find this Data at [opportunityindex.org](http://opportunityindex.org)

Within the map, there are some options for quick comparisons by year, state, and county. In County View, after selecting a county, the data snapshot box allows you to compare two different counties. To view detailed indicators, click "See More Data."



## Scenario 2: Using data to drive strategy for a youth development initiative

A youth development initiative in Durham County, North Carolina works to bolster high school graduation rates and prepare youth to be successful in higher education or the workplace. The program is performing well but wants to use data to drive its strategic plan and to ensure that it adapts appropriately as the community grows and changes. Using the Opportunity Index site, the program staff can explore key indicators and their recent trends.

These data can help program staff see that all the county's domain scores have trended up, except for Education. While the program's on-time graduation rates have been high, these rates have decreased for the county. By contrast, the percentage of youth not in school and not working has declined slightly. Nevertheless, compared to neighboring counties, Durham lags on both indicators.

Program staff might consider reaching out to local schools for more insight or conducting focus groups to help them determine whether their program could either be introduced to more schools or revised to focus more on factors that lead to school dropout. Schools and other stakeholders can also help program staff identify whether changes in specific subgroups of students are driving these trends. Given its strong outcome data, the program might make the case that it can also positively influence these key indicators community wide and seek additional partners (including funders) to further develop the program.

<b>Durham County: 2016, 2017, and 2018</b>			
	2018	2017	2016
<b>Grade</b>	<b>B-</b>	<b>C+</b>	<b>C+</b>
<b>Opportunity Score</b>	<b>54.1</b>	<b>53.3</b>	<b>52.0</b>
<b>Economy Score</b>	<b>53.0</b>	<b>51.5</b>	<b>50.4</b>
<b>Education Score</b>	<b>58.2</b>	<b>58.9</b>	<b>59.9</b>
<b>Community Score</b>	<b>50.4</b>	<b>50.3</b>	<b>46.7</b>
<b>Health Score</b>	<b>54.9</b>	<b>52.4</b>	<b>50.7</b>

<b>Economy</b>	2018	2017	2016
Unemployment Rate (%)	<b>3.3%</b>	3.8%	4.2%
Poverty (% of pop. below poverty line)	<b>17.4%</b>	18.0%	18.1%

<b>Education</b>	2018	2017	2016
Preschool (% ages 3 and 4 in school)	<b>44.7%</b>	49.1%	46.4%
On-Time High School Graduation (% of freshmen who graduate in 4 years)	<b>81.5%</b>	81.3%	84.0%

<b>Community</b>	2018	2017	2016
Youth Not in School and Not Working (% ages 16-24)	<b>12.0%</b>	12.6%	12.7%
Youth Not in School and Not Working (# ages 16-24)	<b>4,415</b>	4,670	4,720

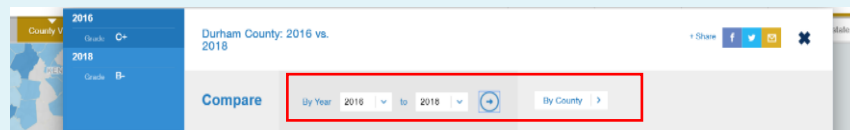
<b>Population</b>	2018	2017	2016
	<b>307,090</b>	<b>300,573</b>	<b>294,460</b>

<b>Neighboring Counties in 2018</b>	Durham	Orange	Wake
On-Time High School Graduation (% of freshmen who graduate in 4 years)	81.5%	88.4%	89.1%
Youth Not in School and Not Working (% ages 16-24)	12.0%	4.6%	7.6%

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### Scenario 3: Using data to increase economic opportunity from a policymaker perspective

A Georgia state representative aims to increase economic opportunity and affordable housing for her district and across the state. She chooses to compare data from Hancock County, in her district, to state-level data and data for Forsyth County—the county with the highest economic opportunity score in the state. (The Opportunity Index can be used to identify key economic indicators and compare trends across states or counties.)

Viewing *State Rankings* data, the representative can see that Georgia lags behind its peer states in the southeast in the share of households spending less than 30 percent of their income on housing. For Georgia, this estimate is 68.8 percent; the estimates are 71.3, 71.8, and 72.5 percent for South Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama, respectively. In the southeast region, residents in Georgia are facing higher housing costs. This informs the representative’s reasoning for backing an economic opportunity agenda in her state.

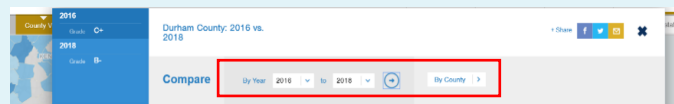
When comparing Hancock County to Forsyth County and the rest of Georgia, the representative sees that unemployment and poverty rates are higher, income inequality is greater, and access to banking services and affordable housing is worse in rural Hancock. The representative may look closer at the data by examining more counties that are similar to Forsyth to understand what might account for their higher scores.

With this information, the representative can develop policies that promote economic opportunity through affordable housing, employment, and safety net programs. Additionally, she can identify other counties with similar opportunity scores and collaborate with their representatives to develop policies and pilot programs in the state.

Georgia and Forsyth and Hancock Counties: 2018			
	Georgia	Forsyth	Hancock
<b>State Rank</b>	44	-	-
<b>Opportunity Score</b>	47.9	64.8	-
<b>Economy Score</b>	53.3	71.8	25.8
<b>Education Score</b>	51.5	76.0	69.6
<b>Community Score</b>	41.3	46.3	25.4
<b>Health Score</b>	45.6	65.0	-
<b>Economy</b>			
Unemployment Rate (%)	3.7%	2.9%	5.6%
Median Household Income (\$)	\$48,739	\$83,576	\$24,011
Poverty (% of pop. below poverty line)	16.0%	6.4%	31.4%
80/20 (Ratio of household income at the 80 <sup>th</sup> percentile to that of the 20 <sup>th</sup> percentile)	4.9	3.9	5.1
Banking Institutions (per 10,000 residents)	3.2	3.5	1.2
Households Spending Less than 30% of Household Income on Housing Costs (%)	68.8%	76.1%	54.4%
High-Speed Internet (% of households)	81.0%	91.5%	-
<b>Population</b>	<b>10,304,763</b>	<b>220,067</b>	<b>8,657</b>

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## Scenario 4: Using data to understand educational differences in a community

A group of parents in Roanoke City have been discussing the barriers to improving student performance and achievement in the city’s public schools and plan to voice their concerns at an upcoming city council meeting. There is a general concern that Roanoke City schools are struggling to provide students with the tools they need to perform well in the classroom. In comparison to Roanoke County, which surrounds the city, students in Roanoke City receive less test preparation and technological equipment like tablets and laptops, and teachers receive less support and resources.

In presenting their concerns to the city council, the parents can use county and city data from the Index to support their argument. The data that Roanoke County is outperforming Roanoke City in all four dimensions of opportunity. In addition, the county performs better on all three of the indicators that make up the Education dimension. During the city council meeting, the parents might choose to focus on the differences in preschool enrollment and high school graduation rate. These data can be used to support the claim that not only are students in Roanoke City not performing well in the classroom, but they are also falling behind at the start and end of their primary and secondary educational careers when compared to students in the county.

Moreover, there are large differences between the county and city, including within the Economy dimension and in terms of demographic composition. Roanoke City has a much larger non-Hispanic Black population, a higher unemployment rate, and a poverty rate that is nearly three times higher. These indicators ultimately demonstrate that economic welfare is higher overall in the county; the demographic differences suggest that these disparities may be related to structural racism. The city parent group can use these data to emphasize the importance of investing needed resources in the city and advocate for policies focused on equity.

Roanoke County and Roanoke City: 2018	Roanoke County	Roanoke City
<b>Grade</b>	<b>B+</b>	<b>C</b>
<b>Opportunity Score</b>	<b>60.8</b>	<b>49.8</b>
<b>Economy Score</b>	<b>66.2</b>	<b>47.8</b>
<b>Education Score</b>	<b>66.8</b>	<b>58.9</b>
<b>Community Score</b>	<b>52.7</b>	<b>50.2</b>
<b>Health Score</b>	<b>57.3</b>	<b>45.9</b>

Economy	Roanoke County	Roanoke City
Unemployment Rate (%)	<b>2.6%</b>	3.2%
Median Household Income (\$)	<b>\$54,946</b>	\$35,673
Poverty (% of pop. below poverty line)	<b>8.0%</b>	22.2%

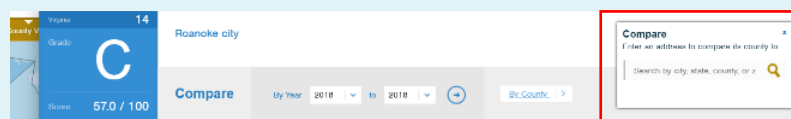
Education	Roanoke County	Roanoke City
Preschool (% ages 3 and 4 in school)	<b>53.8%</b>	47.3%
On-Time High School Graduation (% of freshmen who graduate in 4 years)	<b>94.2%</b>	89.7%
Associate Degree or Higher (% adults 25 and older)	<b>44.6%</b>	31.7%

Population	Roanoke County	Roanoke City
Black, Non-Hispanic	<b>5.7%</b>	<b>29.6%</b>

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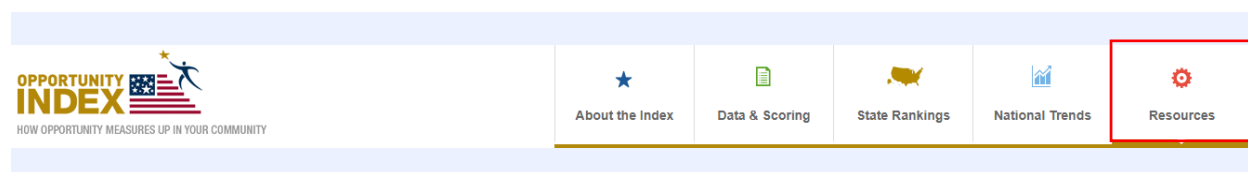


# Using the Opportunity Index Dataset

While the website offers an easy-to-use way to view the Opportunity Index data, diving into the full dataset gives you more power to customize the data to make specific comparisons. The Opportunity Index dataset can be accessed and used for data analyses.

## How to request the dataset

Go to the *Resources* tab along the top of the page and select “Request Data” from the drop-down menu that appears. Provide the necessary contact information and someone from the Opportunity Index team will reach out to you regarding the delivery of the dataset.



## How to navigate the dataset

The dataset will be delivered as an Excel file. The file contains four tabs; on each tab, you'll find the indicators broken down differently:

- By states
- By counties
- By race/ethnicity
- By gender

### Disclaimers

Disaggregation by race/ethnicity or gender was done at the national level. However, it is important to note that not *all* indicators are available disaggregated. While data are provided as far back as the year 2011, please note that comparisons should only be made for the years 2016-2018. This is because the Index was constructed differently prior to 2016, thus data integrity of comparisons to years prior would be lost.

You will find the following data along the dataset's columns:

- FIPS code (Federal Information Processing Standards codes are five-digit codes that uniquely identify counties and county equivalents) and state name
- Opportunity Scores and the change in scores across applicable years
- Ranking according to Opportunity Scores and the change in ranking across applicable years
- Economy score, the economic indicators, and changes in the score and indicators across years
- Education score, the education indicators, and changes across years
- Health score, the health indicators, and changes across years
- Community score, the community indicators, and changes across years
- Demographic indicators and the changes across year

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# Appendix

## A. Indicator Grid

### OPPORTUNITY INDEX INDICATORS

Dimension	Indicator	Description
<b>Economy</b>	<i>Jobs</i>	Unemployment rate (percentage of the population ages 16 and older who are not working but available for and seeking work)
	<i>Wages</i>	Median household income (in 2010 dollars)
	<i>Poverty</i>	Percentage of the population below the federal poverty level (the amount of pretax cash income considered adequate for an individual or family to meet basic needs)
	<i>Income inequality</i>	80/20 ratio (ratio of household income at the 80th percentile to that at the 20th percentile)
	<i>Access to banking services</i>	Number of banking institutions (commercial banks, savings institutions and credit unions) per 10,000 residents
	<i>Affordable housing</i>	Percentage of households spending less than 30 percent of their income on housing-related costs
	<i>Broadband internet subscription</i>	Percentage of households with subscriptions to broadband internet service
<b>Education</b>	<i>Preschool enrollment</i>	Percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds attending preschool
	<i>High school graduation</i>	On-time high school graduation rate (percentage of freshmen who graduate in four years)
	<i>Postsecondary education</i>	Percentage of adults ages 25 and older with an associate degree or higher
<b>Health</b>	<i>Low birth weight</i>	Percentage of infants born weighing less than 5.5 pounds
	<i>Health insurance coverage</i>	Percentage of the population (under age 65) without health insurance coverage
	<i>Deaths related to alcohol/drug use and suicide</i>	Deaths attributed to alcohol or drug poisoning, or suicide (age-adjusted rate per 100,000 population)
<b>Community</b>	<i>Volunteering</i>	Percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who reported they volunteered during the previous year [ <i>national and state-level only</i> ]
	<i>Voter registration</i>	Percentage of adults ages 18 and older who are registered to vote [ <i>national and state-level only</i> ]
	<i>Youth disconnection</i>	Percentage of youth (ages 16–24) not in school and not working
	<i>Violent crime</i>	Incidents of violent crime reported to law enforcement agencies (per 100,000 population)
	<i>Access to primary health care</i>	Number of primary care physicians (per 100,000 population)
	<i>Access to healthy food</i>	Number of grocery stores and produce vendors (per 10,000 population)
	<i>Incarceration</i>	Number of people incarcerated in jail or prison (per 100,000 population 18 and older) [ <i>national and state-level only</i> ]